

VZCZCXRO0497
PP RUEHDE RUEHDH RUEHDIR
DE RUEHRH #0345 0550445
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
P 240445Z FEB 09
FM AMEMBASSY RIYADH
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 0241
INFO RUEHJI/AMCONSUL JEDDAH 0053
RUEHDH/AMCONSUL DHAHRAN 0005
RUEHZM/GCC COLLECTIVE

UNCLAS RIYADH 000345

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR R, NEA/PPD(BENZE), NEA/ARP(HARRIS), and IIP

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KPAO](#) [ECON](#) [OEXC](#) [SCUL](#) [KISL](#) [KDEM](#) [SA](#)

SUBJECT: COINCIDENCE OR CUNNING: SAUDI BLOCK ON E-NEWSPAPER LIFTED
ONE WEEK AFTER GOVERNMENT SHAKEUP

¶1. Arab News reported February 23 that a two-year Saudi block against the London-based Elaph online newspaper (<http://www.elaph.com>) was lifted on February 19. According to Arab News sources, an unnamed "high government official" ordered the Communications and Information Technology Commission (CITC) to lift the block. The lifting of the ban has not been officially announced by the Saudi government, but Elaph's technical department announced that 40,000 hits were received from the Kingdom on the first day the block was lifted. No official reason was given by Saudi officials for the block, which took effect in 2006.

¶2. Owned by seasoned and occasionally controversial Saudi journalist Othman Al-Omair, Elaph claims to receive 15 million hits daily, with 240,000 distinct visitors daily. The Arabic language site, which launched in 2001, covers issues ranging from politics and economics to culture. Omair, the former Editor-in-Chief of the pan-Arab ASharq Al-Awsat newspaper, once famously remarked that the only thing Arab ministers of information could agree upon was "media censorship."

¶3. The removal of the block coincides with recent changes in the Saudi government, including at the Ministry of Culture and Information. On February 14 King Abdullah replaced Minister of Culture and Information Iyad bin Ameen Madani with former Saudi Ambassador to Lebanon Abdul-Aziz Al-Khoja.

¶4. Al-Khoja is no stranger to the ministry, having served as Undersecretary for Information Affairs in 1984 before becoming chairman of the Executive Councils of the International Islamic News Agency (IINA) and the Islamic States' Broadcasting Organization (ISBO), the specialized media organs of the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC). In an interview with Saudi Gazette after his appointment was announced, Al-Khoja promised to "realize the aspirations of the [Saudi] leadership to extend the reach and impact of the Saudi media worldwide," adding that "The most important thing is that the Kingdom's voice should reach the entire world ... and portray the Kingdom's stance of moderation, tolerance, and flexibility."

¶5. Comment: Whether the lifting of the block on Elaph represents a new direction by the Ministry of Information or just coincidence remains to be seen. We cannot help but wonder, however, how such a move could be accidental. End Comment.

FRAKER